

CULTURE AND RESISTANCE SYMPOSIUM

GABORONE 1982

Is Black Poetry Valid?

James Matthews

There are those who are vehement in their protestation that there is no such animal as Black poetry; that poetry has no racial overtones. Poetry, for them, has no colour connotation. Their allegiance to poetry as an art form prevents them reaching the realisation that if poetry could espouse the nationalistic fervour of a country's people then it can in the same sense express the feelings of people who are discriminated against because of pigmentation.

Poetry, like any art form, is a means of communication. Communication on two levels. Communication on an aesthetic level using words and phrases that are within the understanding and approval of a sector of the people, or the gut-level of the majority of the people with the use of words and phrases that are easily assimilated.

In the case of a Black poet who lives in a society that is discriminatory towards those who have black skins, the poet, if he is concerned about the plight of those who are discriminated against, would write about the role of a Black man in a white-dominated society, and would use words that will be familiar to those with whom he wants to communicate.

The stance of Black poetry written in South Africa, and I am restricting myself to works written in 1970 and up to the present time, has been shaped by the mixture of "praise of one's Blackness and the assertiveness of one's Blackness."

Black poetry is now synonymous with Black Consciousness and Black Power.

Black Consciousness - the Consciousness of one's Blackness -

a Consciousness that brings about a pride and dignity not accorded by a racist oppressor was nurtured by the poetry of Leopold Senghor of Senegal, one of the exponents of the "Black is Beautiful" theme.

The word "Negritude" was coined by Senghor and his contemporaries to counter French cultural domination. Although Senegal was then freed of French colonisation, Senghor and others, through poetry, plays and music strove to instil in the people of Senegal a feeling of pride in themselves and their ancestry. Langston Hughes, in America, contributed to Black pride, but it was in the period of the civil rights strife that poets like Leroy Jones and Nikki Giovanni showed that their poetry not only reflected Black pride but also militancy.

Poets like S.V. Petersen, P.J. Philander and Adam Small are familiar names to readers of Afrikaans poetry, but the first two - Petersen and Philander - are more concerned to work within the subscribed style and rarely was the plight of the oppressed Black featured in their poetry.

Adam Small, in his patio-Afrikaans poetry showed concern for the Coloured group whom he presented as a dispirited lot fatalistically accepting their role in white society.

With the advent of Hein Willemsse's Angsland, Afrikaans poetry written by Blacks indicates a move away from passivity.

The tune of the Black protest poet is one of anger; their shout is one of defiance. They roared their rage. Mongane Serote, Oswald Mtshali, Pascal Gwala, Don Mattera and Sipho Sepamla, and their ranks increase. They are the vanguard of Black militant poetry.

They produced a form of poetry that shocked the listener with its strident militancy, especially those from the white sector. The Black poet became the recorder of events that occur in the Black community; events that are mainly caused by the actions of white domination.

The emergence of Black poetry also brought about a sharp reaction on the part of the state who saw a danger in the articulation of the aspirations and anger of the oppressed through the works of the Black poet, and accordingly took retaliatory action.

Cry Rage, published by Spro-Cas in 1973, was the first book of poetry banned in South Africa. It must have been one of the few collections discussed in Parliament. They could not decide whether it had aesthetic value or a work of anarchy. Books by other poets shared the same fate. Not only were their books banned, but also the poets suffered the wrath of the state. Pascal Gwala has not been able to obtain a passport, and Don Mattera's 10 year banning order was lifted after he had endured 8 1/2 years of mental privation.

Black poetry takes in every sphere of Black lives and those who write the words live it.

The adherents to the aesthetics of poetry pour scorn on the works of most of the militant protest poets, stating that these poets should stick to writing political pamphlets and that their writing consists of political cliches, labelling them as "gut poets."

Most of the poets are not concerned with creating metaphors, and lines that lead to obscurity - their poetry is almost bald statements of fact.

The protest poet, intentionally or unintentionally, has stripped himself of the trappings of the poet; the stylistics of poetry is not in evidence. Content is what counts.

The Black poet, in most cases, has accepted that he will not be recognised by the pseudo-academic or critic as a poet. He does not write from an ivory tower for an elitist minority. He regards himself as a poet of the people, from the people, and uses words understandable to all.

These poets are with no illusions that what they are writing could be termed poetry or would necessarily be remembered after this period of discrimination by pigmentation is over.

Most of what is written now will only remain as a historical literary curiosity; a form of communication brought about by racist oppressive laws directed against a Black majority.

But there certainly will be poems by the Serotes, Gwalas, and others, that will always be recalled not because it spoke of their blackness but because of the eloquence of its writing.

It is most probably puzzling that at no stage are the works of any of the poets quoted in this short paper. The reason is that there are an ever-growing number of them, and it would be unfair to restrict myself to only mentioning a few, and then evidently those who have been quoted so many times in the past.

As I do not regard myself as a poet and refer to my works as expressions of feelings, I feel justified quoting a few lines from No Time for Dreams.

freedom is not the colour of my
black skin
my blackness a cloak to flaunt
proclaiming that only i am free
because of the bondage suffered
freedom coloured by blackness is
a dream
there is no time for dreams

On a personal level, the feelings that I have expressed in my works published had always highlighted the aspirations and dignity of being Black but not advocating Black Nationalism.

The answer to the heading of this paper - Is Black Poetry Valid? - is the factor that our poetry has become an integral part in the struggle for liberation. At every commemoration service or the death of a detainee or the funeral of whoever died because of a political action, Black militant protest poetry is read in the hall, church and graveside.

Black poetry has become a powerful force, and is readily accepted by its audience. There is no longer the need to look to America for militant Black poetry for sustenance, or cloak oneself in the cloth of Negritude imported from Senegal.

Home-grown poets have increased in number and are strong enough to feed the needs of the oppressed.

Collection Name: MEDU ON-LINE

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

Location: Johannesburg

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